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ABSTRACT

A new blueprint for the education of the Mexican American is proposed in this paper, incorporating what has been learned from past failures. It is based on the philosophical assumptions that (1) bilingualism is an asset and not a liability and (2) education must be planned for each child according to his needs. Five basic curriculum reforms conducive to better performance by the Mexican American are proposed. These include (1) assessment of language competency, (2) the attitude toward the Spanish language of the Southwest, (3) the use of Spanish as a vehicle of learning, (4) the emphasis on oral language development, and (5) the reevaluation of testing instruments. Some of these reforms have been in operation on a limited basis through Title I, Title III, or Title VII Federal funds. (NQ)

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# A BLUEPRINT FOR THE EDUCATION OF THE MEXICAN AMERICAN

Mario Benitez, Texas A & I

It has been said that the average Mexican American (over age 25) has an educational level of less that eight years. It was estimated six years ago that over 80% of Mexican American in Texas did not complete high school. Finally, we learn that as of 1970 between 35 to 40 percent of Mexican American families earn less that $3,600 and are, therefore, living in the culture of poverty. Whatever the old blueprint was for the education of the Mexican American, it did not seem to help very much almost five million citizens grouped mostly in the five Southwestern states. To them education and the good life was and still is an impossible dream.

This paper chooses to propose a new blueprint in education. It represents, hopefully, an improvement over what has existed before. It incorporates what has been learned from the failures of the past. It is, perhaps, more in accordance with the aspirations of the Mexican American community for the present and for the future. And it is just a blueprint, a plan for action, a guide for building. It is based on two philosophical assumptions and it proposes five basic reforms in the educational systems generally found in the Southwest.

## Philosophical Assumptions

### Bilingualism is an asset

The first philosophical assumption states that bilingualism is an asset, not a liability. A statement such as this seems to be true beyond a reasonable doubt. It is a mystery how just the opposite has been held as certain in so many schools, and for so long a time. Bilingualism seems to be recognized almost universally as a sign of an educated man. Businesses spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in training executives and middle management personnel in basic understanding and speaking skills in a second language. The same basic skills a Mexican American first grader in the Southwest already has.

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In the past two years the Social Security Administration has awarded contracts for one-month training in Spanish of their Southwestern personnel. At least four of these contracts have trained between 150 and 175 employees in the basic skills of a language at a cost of approximately $150,000. It is important to note that we are talking about the same language whose use was forbidden in school at any time except in high schools during Spanish class. And even than, a great number of these classes were and still are being conducted in English. Universities in the Southwest have been advised by businesses and industry that they are ready to employ immediately and at a premium all bilingual secretaries the universities can produce. In New York and Chicago there are employment agencies that specialize only in bilingual personnel. A visit in 1972 to four of these agencies showed that a bilingual engineer, a bilingual marketing man, a bilingual accounting, a bilingual agricultural expert are at a premium even in today's tight job market. In the tighter teacher market there are now abundant positions open for elementary teachers, early childhood teachers, special education teachers who happen to be bilingual. While the area of languages per se may be somewhat overcrowded, the skill of being bilingual is a definite marketable asset in many areas of teaching.

Why has bilingualism been considered a liability in our schools? Perhaps because ability to understand and speak Spanish has been blamed for apparent inability to keep up with English at the rate of speed of monolingual English children. As it has been expressed often by numerous teachers: every minute given to Spanish is a minute lost to learning English. The statement is historical. It is being said now just as it has been said for many years. It is being "thought" now by many more who do not care to say it in public. To the best of my knowledge there is no linguistic reason why this should be so. There seems to be no reason firmly rooted in psychology of learning for this to be so. Spanish in the Southwest has been associated with the darker skinned,

farm worker, uneducated Mexican American. It was, therefore, an "inferior" language. Logically, then, it was assumed that an inferior language should not take up valuable time needed for the learning of the English language. There is today a substantial number of educators who interpret this in a totally different way. It is not knowing Spanish that has kept many Mexican Americans from knowing English and succeeding in school. It is rather the inability of the educational system to take this fact into account and to plan educational programs accordingly. The liability of bilingualism has been only in the eye of the beholder not in the child who was bilingual. Any blueprint for the education of the Mexican American must be based on the principle that bilingualism is an asset, not a liability.

To each according to his need

The second philosophical assumption upon which a blueprint for the education of the Mexican American should be based states that education must be planned for each child according to his need. Education can accept common goals but, at the same time, it must carefully examine what is it the child needs in order to help him achieve these goals. General education in our free society assumes a common core of ideals, attitudes, methods, and content. It also adopts evaluation of achievement by somewhat rigid levels. It finally seeks standardization of procedures, evaluation and administration. The concept of the mean has become increasingly significant in the educational world. It may be asked: why must we standardize? It is a workable arrangement. It places things neatly. It places the part in its relationship to a clearly defined whole. It makes the business of administering the educational structure more palatable and less troublesome. It even makes reasearch results applicable to other situations and allows generalizations.

Standardization, however, carries with it seeds of unadaptability. It tends to make a homogeneous mass out of heterogeneous components. The child or the child's group must "fit" into the common mass of data, no matter how discrete the child or the group may be. Success is measured in relation to how many standards of deviation one differs from the "mean."

It seems that the Mexican American child has suffered from such standardization. The Spanish he knew was not counted into the picture because it did not fit. The wealth of cultural experiences he possessed was set aside because there were no standardized texts, materials, or tests available. So he entered the first grade where he learned quickly what the rules of the game were. No Spanish. Only English. The language of his mama, daddy, and grandmother was never heard when new things were presented in language arts, science, math or social science. Perhaps English could have been exciting if he could have coped with it. But in most cases he could not. The day he set his foot in that classroom he was already several months behind the child who knew only English. He did not know it. But his teachers soon did. The Pre-primer was too much for him. He could not participate in "show and tell." He could not talk much. Soon he talked very little.

The Mexican American child had some very specific needs. He was not hearing some sounds and needed to practice hearing them. He was hispanizing other sounds and needed corrective practice. He was not using the -s in the third person singular of verbs, nor was he using the -ed ending in the past tense. A lot of practice was needed here. He needed time for oral language development before he could enter into the pre-reading program. All of these he needed. But the curriculum was not planned with him in mind. He was measured according to his performance as it compared with the performance of those children who knew only English. He failed. Some failed two or three times the first

grade and became sixth graders at the age of fifteen. The textbooks used and the curriculum guides insisted that he was supposed to know what apparently he did not know. Authors of books on reading could not possibly have the needs of the Mexican American first grader in mind when their texts became commercialized. Classroom teachers were too busy with thirty and thirty-five children in a classroom to give individual attention and bridge the gap the textbooks were widening. The results have become dark statistics in the educational history of the Mexican American.

A blueprint for the education of the Mexican American must be based on the principle that the curriculum must be designed to meet the specific needs of Mexican Americans. The curriculum designed for the monolingual English child has not been successful. It must be adapted, refined, and made relevant to a new set of needs. Only then can success be expected.

## Basic Reforms

Acceptance of the two philosophical assumptions upon which a blueprint for the education of the Mexican American may be based is not enough. This paper wishes to propose five basic reforms in the curriculum hopefully conducive to better performance and less failure. Some have already been in operation on a limited basis through the influx of federal funds under Title I, Title III, or Title VII. Others are very much in today's literature as cried for change.

### Assessment of language competency

It is assumed that the Mexican American child is bilingual when he gets to first grade. In most cases this is so. No effort, however, has been made to assess to what extent is the child bilingual. As of this date no instruments have been developed that can effectively measure the degree of proficiency in either language. As a result the child has some command of both languages but the teacher does not know how much he really knows in each

one. The development of such instruments is a matter of high priority in the education of the Mexican American. Unless this is done there is no possibility of proper planning in curriculum. No two children come to school with the same set of skills equally developed. It is imperative that specifically in the area of oral language development reliable instruments be available for measuring language skills.

Attitude toward Spanish of the Southwest

The child's Spanish language is usually referred to as "TEX MEX." Tex Mex is considered by a large number of teachers, parents, and even students themselves as an inferior dialect of the true language which is Spanish or Castillian. Nothing can be farther from the truth, and unless this attitude changes the child will grow up apologizing for the Spanish he uses. The Spanish of the Mexican American of the Southwest is not Tex Mex. It is Spanish. As Spanish as the language of Madrid, Barcelona, Buenos Aires or San Juan. It is indeed a dialect, but then the languages of Madrid, Barcelona, Buenos Aires and San Juan are dialects also. Everything within a language region is dialectical. The dialect of the Southwest is not the same as the dialect from Madrid. But the dialect from Sevilla is quite different from the Madrid dialect also. I can still imagine someone telling my grandmother from Sevilla that she was using only a dialect! She spoke Spanish. So does the Mexican American. The Spanish of the Southwest must not sound like Spanish from Madrid. Why should it? It has a flavor that must be kept as a part of the culture. No teacher has the right to destroy this flavor in the name of purity of the language.

Use of Spanish as a vehicle of learning

The Mexican American child can and will learn if the curriculum is adapted to his needs. To the extent that he knows Spanish, Spanish should be used in the classroom. Mathematics, science or social studies concepts are not learned exclusively through English. Spanish will do just as well. If the child

knows one language exclusively or primarily, let him learn in that language until he has time to develop the other language. The story of Title VII programs since 1968 has proven that the child does learn in Spanish, does transfer this knowledge into English, and does feel quite proud at his achievement in doing so. Bilingual education has become a landmark in the education of the bilingual child. It has opened the way to a new method and a new approach to education in the Southwest. It uses what the child has in obtaining what is expected of him. One of the great successes of the use of Spanish has been in the area of reading. Bilingual children have begun to read in Spanish already in the first grade and before they began reading in English. An experiment of almost 1,000 children in Houston proved that by the end of the first grade children could decode syllables and words, and were already reading on their own Spanish books at their level. These were children from schools where there was a 50 to 70 percent retention rate. Reports from those schools indicate that success in reading in English is extraordinary compared to previous norms. That child "knows" that he can read already.

Emphasis on oral language development

The experience of bilingual programs points out what appears to be a rather significant weakness of the elementary language arts curriculum: the too early introduction of the pre-reading and reading program for the Mexican American child. All pre-primers and primers available in the market assume a level of development in oral language that the Mexican American child has not reached at the beginning of the first grade. Phonologically speaking he neither hears nor discriminates certain individual sounds. Accustomed as he is to hearing Spanish mostly at home, he hears Spanish in the classroom instead of English and tries to decode accordingly. The result is frustration and awareness that he is failing at something the other children are succeeding.

Every reading program must be based on a solid base of oral language development. This base is lacking as a general rule in the case of the bilingual child. His stress and intonation patterns are Spanish, not English. Morphemes which are exclusively the property of the English language are bypassed because he does not hear them. He frequently substitutes Spanish for English words, and Spanish for English syntactical patterns. His ability at the beginning of his first grade to sustain a complete thought in English is very limited.

Some school districts are beginning to delay the introduction of reading in English until the beginning of the second grade. Others until the second semester of the first grade. It was their feeling that nothing would be lost since a substantial number of children were being retained anyway. All efforts were made to develop an active and meaningful program of development of oral language. The children practiced songs, rhymes, short sentences, intonation, pronunciation, etc. The results were outstanding. The retention rate dropped from 70% to 25% in one case; from 80% to 35% in another case; from 65% to 20% in a third case. Delaying the reading program has become a regular fixture of their curriculum.

Reevaluation of testing instruments

A blueprint for the education of the Mexican American cannot adopt present standardized testing instruments as a measure of achievement. The desire of school districts to test all their children against a national norm has proven to be detrimental to the Mexican American. It allows no time to "catch up" on language skills, it gives no credit for different cultural experiences, and penalizes a highly individualized curriculum. If one must test by the norm, one must teach by the norm. It is unfortunate that the Mexican American child is tested by that norm before he is given the chance to get close to it.

This paper proposes a different approach to testing. On the basis of known needs, a series of competencies are developed. They represent exactly what the child is expected to accomplish at the end of the first grade, or the second, or the third. All the curriculum, all efforts are directed toward the goal of achieving these specific competencies. The role of testing, any testing, becomes clear. Has the child achieved these competencies? No standardized instruments are necessary since the purpose of testing is no longer to find out the child's percentile ranking. The curriculum has been centered around specific competencies. If the child achieves them he has been successful. If he is successful, no comparison to a national norm seems necessary or meaningful.